

Mr. Harper's child-proof political strategy

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Okay, Canada, Mother's Day Pop Quiz.

Question: What policy idea is capable of uniting: (a) social conservatives, (b) advocates of smaller government, and (c) Quebec, the most socially progressive region in North America?

Answer: A \$1,200 child benefit.

Stephen Harper, please move to the head of the class.

Of the Harper government's five central priorities, the plan to nix national public daycare in favour of a cash allowance for parents is the most loaded. Government ethics? Go for it. GST? Smooth move. Wait times? Not altogether new. Crime crackdown? Slam dunk. But replacing plans for a national public daycare infrastructure with an annual cheque? Now that is a policy whose values and implications strike at the heart of millions of Canadians' lives -- and ideals.

The \$1,200 is a surprising and ingenious bridge between Mr. Harper's base and the group most likely to push him into majority territory in the next election.

At present, there are a few groups living comfortably under Mr. Harper's tent. One is made up of social conservatives, who celebrate the child benefit as an aid to keeping kids at home with mom or dad (preferably mom), instead of pitching them into some public child-care farm. Another is made up of fiscal conservatives and small-government types, who are loath to see yet another costly, universal public entitlement -- with its attendant bureaucracy -- handed to the Canadian people. Both these groups have ideological reasons for supporting the Conservative plan over the proposed Liberal one, and they probably feel they dodged the bullet of Liberal largesse in this area just in time.

In a new Environics poll on Mr. Harper's child-benefit plan, conducted this month and last, we found support among Conservative backers outweighing opposition more than two to one (67 per cent versus 27 per cent). Support among Canadians at large is less pronounced (51 per cent), but parents of children under 6 express an almost Conservative degree of enthusiasm: 64 per cent favour the \$1,200 benefit.

There is another group that is especially enthusiastic about the Conservative plan: parents of young children in Quebec. About seven in 10 parents of children under the age of 6 report that they would rather have a cheque for \$1,200 than the national child-care program proposed by the previous government. (Sample size for this parental subgroup becomes small, increasing the margin of error. Still, compared to a national average of 51 per cent, it is clear that support among Quebec parents is notably high.)

On an ideological level, this may appear surprising. For one thing, Quebecers tend to be left-leaning and less suspicious of government programs than other Canadians (Liberal advertising campaigns notwithstanding). Quebecers are also overwhelmingly progressive on social issues, and their commitment to gender equality has led them to a strong interest in public daycare, at least partly as a means of facilitating labour force participation among women. An OECD report on female labour force participation, released in 2004, affirms that "from the point of view of stimulating female participation, child-care subsidies [government-funded child-care programs] appear preferable to child benefits [cash or tax allowances in the manner of the Harper government]"

But on a practical level, of course, Quebecers have no need for a national, public child-care program; they already have their own. Under the Harper plan, Quebec parents will receive cash in addition to their provincial, public child-care infrastructure; that \$1,200 can be used to pay a good chunk of the onerous \$7 a day they currently pay for care.

Unlike in the rest of Canada, in Quebec the money from the feds does not represent a tradeoff; it's icing on the cake. Or butter on the popcorn, if you prefer.

Stephen Harper, for now, has his caucus and even his cabinet firmly in hand when it comes to speaking in public and letting slip any ideas they might have about how to run the country. The party's public emphasis on the five priorities has been extraordinarily disciplined. And since the child benefit is the most substantive of these, it will likely take up a lot of space on the Conservative platform, and feature prominently in any discussions that might unfold in a federal election, whenever that may come. It is handy (and/or brilliant), therefore, that this happens to be a policy that tucks some unlikely bedfellows in together.

Will cold hard cash, then, be the future of child care in Canada? Is the idea of a subsidized national infrastructure receding irrevocably into history? It's certainly possible. But I wouldn't bet \$1,200 on it. The Harper plan appeals to a deeply held Canadian value of autonomy: Give me the money and I'll do what I think is best for my child.

But the value of equality is also deeply held, and this applies to the child-care issue in a couple of ways. For one thing, there is ample evidence to suggest that since women assume disproportionate responsibility for the care of children, their opportunities to pursue work outside the home are considerably enhanced when there are institutional child-care supports in place. Do women want to work -- or are they just saddled with the expectation (social and financial) that they will? The Vanier Institute, relying on Statistics Canada data, reports that nearly four in 10 married mothers (38 per cent) who do not participate in the labour force would like to seek a job but don't do so for personal or family reasons. That proportion increases for the young; among women 25 to 34, it's closer to half.

In addition to equality among adult men and women, there is the ideal of equality among the children who receive the care. The age at which children enter school has been creeping lower and lower: senior kindergarten, junior kindergarten, and for some kids -- whose parents are either

hard at work or desirous that their little geniuses get a head start in a stimulating social environment -- early-childhood education.

There is a school of thought that suggests that the sooner kids enter a shared learning environment -- as opposed to homes and other care situations that may offer varying degrees of stimulation and encouragement -- the more likely it is that when school starts, they'll find themselves at the head of the starting line.

The idea of children being snatched from the family hearth at an ever-younger age may sound to some like a Spartan nightmare. Dr. Jean-François Chicoine recently stirred considerable controversy in Quebec with his claim in *Le bébé et l'eau du bain* (*The Baby and the Bathwater*) that children are being shuffled into child care too early. But many affluent parents are thrilled to enroll their little darlings in Montessori and other programs at the age of 2 or 3, seeing this as not just a time-saving measure, but as a competitive advantage in the form of structured stimulation. Surely, the option of a "head start," if one believes it to be such, should not belong only to the wealthy?

The issues to consider when it comes to child care are as plentiful as the anxieties parents face about making the wrong choice for their kids -- or for themselves. Mr. Harper has struck on a policy that appeals to parents, delights his base, and draws in an unlikely constituency of opportunity.

I suspect that in the long run, the Canadian values landscape will lead us to a national, public child-care infrastructure.

But between now and then, our discussions of what it means today, in Canada, to be a family, a mom, a dad, a man, a woman, a caregiver, and an educator, will be fascinating. And, like a nutritious mid-morning snack, these discussions will be good for us.

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